

Constructing and Chunking: Writing Fact Sheets for Understanding

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Active Voice

Help the reader stay engaged with active voice

Using active voice is more engaging for readers than passive voice. But, what is the difference? A check is to insert [by zombies] in the sentence (Johnson, 2012). If an action can be done by zombies, the sentence is passive voice. If the zombies aren't doing anything, the action and verbs are active. Some sentence examples are below:

Passive voice:

Growers are encouraged [by zombies] to pay attention to costs before they make an investment [by zombies] in a new operation.

Active voice:

Growers should evaluate costs before investing in a new operation.
(no zombies)

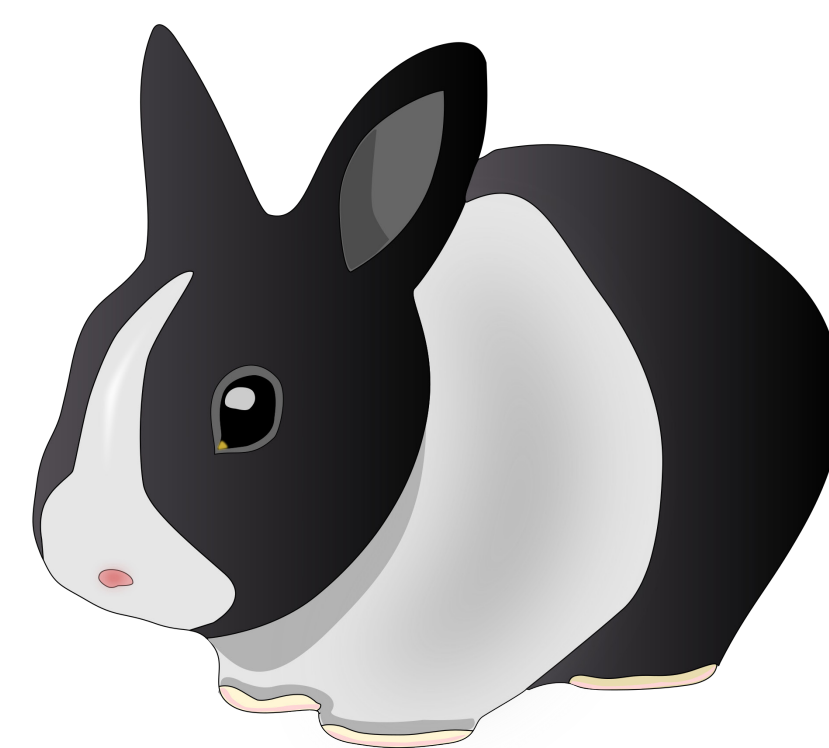


Inserting [by zombies] is a quick check for passive voice in writing (Johnson, 2012).

Coherence

Help the reader avoid distractions with consistency

Consistency makes technical concepts easier for a reader (Dirksen, 2012). If a reader has no prior knowledge about the subject matter, interchanging technical terms will be confusing and frustrating. This distraction could cause the reader frustration and they move to another source.



Is this a bunny, a hare, or a rabbit? Consistent terms help avoid confusion (Whithaus, 2014).

Keeping tenses and language consistent also make the fact sheet more coherent. A fact sheet written in both second and third person can increase confusion. An example is:

Mixed second and third person:

Hot beds and cold frames are used by gardeners to propagate vegetables and flowers. You can use a hot bed for starting the plants and many home gardeners use cold frames for hardening plants before transplanting.

Third person only:

Hot beds and cold frames are used by gardeners to propagate vegetables and flowers. Typically, plants are started in hot beds and hardened before transplanting in cold frames.

Acknowledgments

- Dirksen, J. (2012). *Design for How People Learn*. Berkley, CA: New Riders
- Johnson, R. (2012). @johnsonr Tweeted on Oct. 18, 2012
- Malinich, T (2017). Outline for growing vegetables fact sheets.
- Whithaus, S. (2014). The Learner as the Teacher. Presented at National Manual Workshop, Pesticide Safety Education IMI Program
- Photos and graphics from Creative Commons by pixabay.com

Constructing and Chunking

When literacy level ≠ comprehension level

Literacy level does not always equal comprehension level. Writing for comprehension is more than focusing on writing for a literacy level, such writing for a sixth-grade reading level. Scientific and technical subjects should be written to engage the audience and eliminate distractions. An engaged reader will focus on the subject matter, which increases comprehension and retention. If a reader is not engaged, but still forcing themselves to read the content, they will become distracted or experience fatigue and stop reading. (Dirksen, 2012). The goal is to keep the reader engaged—but how?

Engage the reader

By organizing the information to help the reader easily navigate the concepts, comprehension and learning about the subject matter will increase. Writing should be:

- Constructed – organized to help the reader move easily through the subject matter
- Chunked – organized to keep similar topics together to help the reader move from one topic to another

Avoid distractions

Poorly-worded sentences or confusing use of technical terms increases distractions for the reader navigating the fact sheet. Using active voice increases readability and reduces distractions.

Writing should be:

- Coherent – consistent tense, voice and technical terminology through the fact sheet
- In active voice – avoid passive voice which is less engaging and increases the number of words.

Constructing

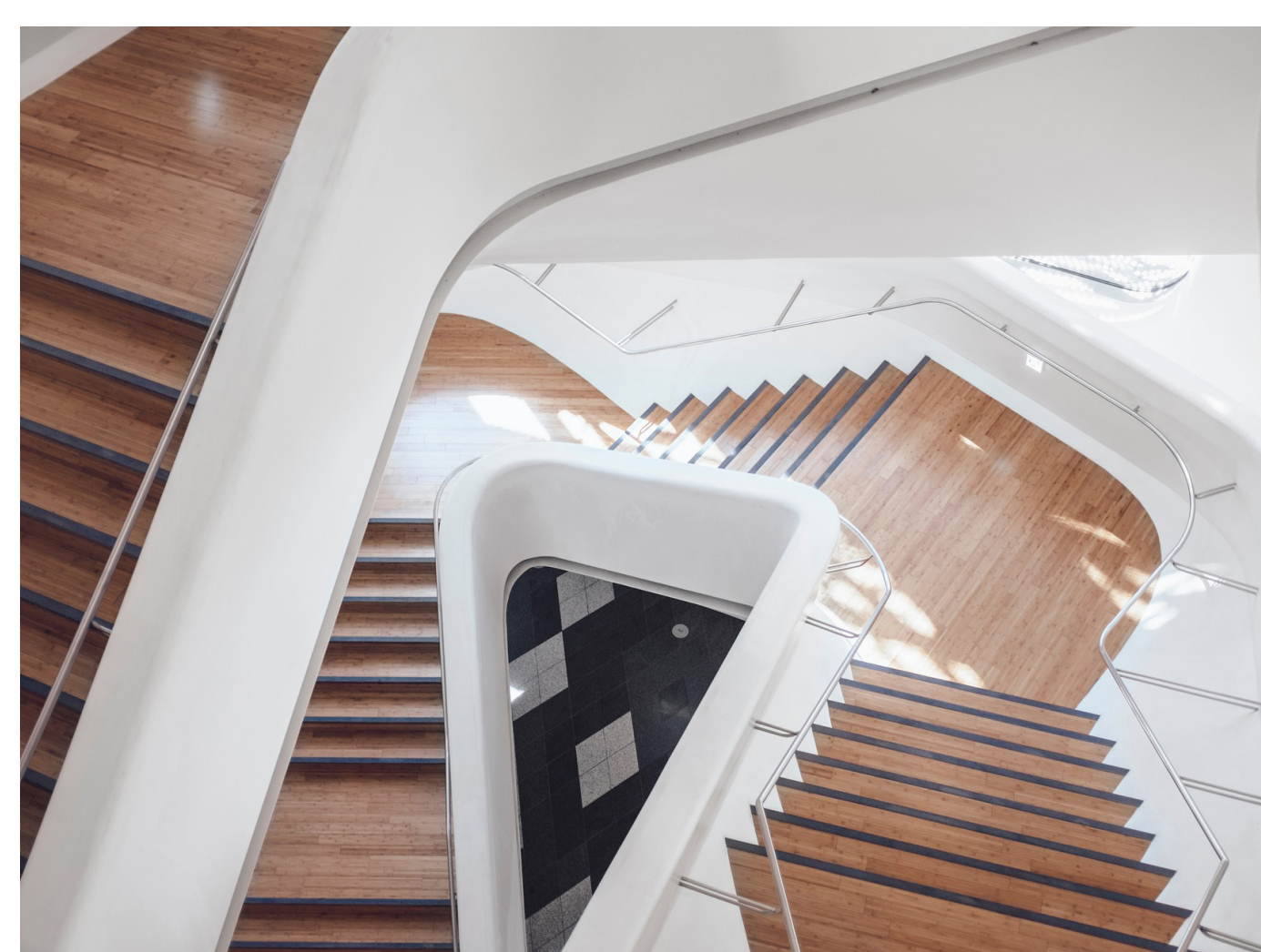
Help the reader navigate the information without confusion

What is the goal of the fact sheet? What information should the audience know after reading? A fact sheet should identify the goal for the reader, then map out the knowledge needed to be successful. A fact sheet is like helping someone organize for a journey; the destination is identified, but planning and knowledge is still needed for determining cost, finding transportation, and packing supplies to being successful.

But where to start? First, the audience needs to be assessed--what do they know about the subject matter. Does the audience have:

- Prior knowledge about the subject or do they need background information?
- Understanding of the technical terms, or do they need definitions?

Writing should be organized to help the reader find their way easily. If the writing is confusing, the reader to loses the way, becomes frustrated and stops reading. Understanding the audience will determine the starting point and map for the fact sheet.



The staircase on the right illustrates organized writing that leads the reader to the next level. The left picture is a staircase, but it's difficult to discern the destination and where the journey begins or ends.



Chunking

Help the reader move from one topic to another by keeping similar ideas together

Chunking, or organizing, the topics together will help the reader navigate the text. For example, a fact sheet about growing a certain vegetable in the garden can be overwhelming—there's a lot of information to communicate. Chunking information and using headings as cues will help the reader navigate the information. Malinich (2017) developed example headings for vegetable fact sheets:

- Site requirements
- Suggested cultivars
- Planting procedures
- Fertilizing requirements
- Pest management
- Harvesting tips

The reader can easily navigate to each topic area and find the information. Graphics can also chunk information for the reader. Creating a series of fact sheets with the same chunking will help readers comprehend multiple, related topics.



The fruit in the left photo is randomly mixed. If the reader is unfamiliar with the fruit types because of culture or experience, it would be difficult to help them distinguish between a strawberry and a raspberry. The fruit on the right is sorted, or chunked, to easily show differences to the reader. (Whithaus, 2014).



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